

# Team Teaching: Plus or Minus ESP

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*By Anthony Bynom*

This article is based on the practical experience of teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in the same class as a content instructor in the engineering faculty of the United Arab Emirates University (UAE). It examines classroom dynamics as they evolved, studies the advantages and drawbacks, and addresses the question of whether such an approach can take the place of specific ESP courses.

The language of instruction in the Faculty of Engineering is English. Before entering the faculty, students have usually studied English at the university's General Requirements Unit for between one and three semesters. This is in addition to the English they have taken in high school. Despite the English studies, many students do not have the required language skills to benefit from their engineering courses.

An article appearing in a UAE English language newspaper, *Gulf News*, on April 15, 1998, dealt with the difficulties UAE graduates had in finding jobs in the private sector. The main point of this article was that graduates were unable to communicate properly in either written or spoken English. Additionally, there is evidence that engineering students worldwide are poor communicators (Davies 1996).

## Language Support Service, (LSS)

The Language Support Service was started to help rectify the problems previously mentioned. It is staffed by ESP teachers and has two main functions. The first is to devise, deliver, and test an appropriate ESP engineering course for undergraduates, ideally in their freshman year. The second is to provide language support throughout the undergraduates' stay in the faculty. This is done by staffing an LSS office, where students can seek advice on such things as report writing, oral presentations, job applications, and curricula vitae.

## The course

In an effort to address the lack of communication skills of engineering students in the United States, many engineering schools altered their freshman courses to place more emphasis on such skills. The UAE Faculty of Engineering has modified an engineering curriculum from a United States university.

Our modification was to divide the existing engineering course, Fundamentals of Engineering, into two parts. The first part, based more on traditional engineering, focused on problem solving, using math and computer software. The second part investigated aspects of the engineering profession. The course objectives were to promote self-learning and teamwork, and to develop oral and written communication skills. The LSS was invited to supply teachers to help in the second part of the course. The course is a seminar in which students are divided into teams to conduct research on five topics. The teams then report on the outcomes of their research. Each topic covers a 3-week period, the five topics covered in a 16-week semester. The topics are:

1. Engineering Information Resources
2. Engineering Disciplines and Engineering Societies
3. Engineering Companies
4. Engineering Ethics
5. An Engineering Case Study

During the first week, students are given feedback on their works on the previous topic, and they are introduced to the next topic. During the second week, each team gives a written and oral progress report, and any problems are discussed. In the third week, the teams give oral presentations of their findings as well as formal technical reports. Thus, the students are expected to give five written reports and five oral presentations. They are also expected to participate in classroom discussions.

### Needs analysis

Although the dynamics of the class evolved as it was presented, a needs analysis was conducted before the course began. The headings in figure 1 were selected for areas in which the ESP teacher could be helpful. These areas were identified as the following:

*Oral Skills:* helping students formulate, answer, and ask questions; advising on verbal and nonverbal communication for presentations, including vocabulary and pronunciation; building confidence to encourage participation in discussion and oral presentations.

*Written Skills:* helping students with note-taking and technical report writing, including writing appropriately succinct introductions and conclusions; using heads and subheads; using the passive voice appropriately, and writing class references.

Teacher helped students select relevant ideas and materials from large bodies of text.

It seemed obvious that the English content would have to be more intense at the beginning of the course. Thus, after the subject teacher had introduced the first topic, I presented the English skill-building techniques that I had identified. I first used ice-breaking exercises, followed by some exercises designed to build confidence in public speaking. Both the content teacher and I repeated the procedure with a second group. But this time we decided to have mini English presentations of between 5 and 15 minutes in the engineering class. This worked well, and students were soon coming to the ESP teacher for advice during the lesson and afterward.

### Results

One of the positive results that emerged from the team teaching effort was that the ESP teacher came to be accepted as part of the class. Formerly, we were seen as visitors and, as such, we changed the dynamics of the class. The experience of team teaching allowed the ESP teacher to become part of the dynamics of the classroom and to experience the kinds of difficulties the students face in an engineering course.

Another positive result of our team teaching effort was the increased use of the LSS office. Before the team teaching course, the office was open 10 hours per week and received 78 visits from students during the week. In the first semester of the team teaching, student visits to the LSS office increased to around 160 visits. The following semester the LSS office opened for 12 hours per week and received 298 visits. Because the students saw the ESP teacher as a useful resource, they continued to use this resource as they progressed into their second year.

### Student reaction

The 39 students in the course (22 male and 17 female) answered questionnaires at the end of the semester. Those results relevant to English communication skills were presented.

### Conclusion

Team teaching has successfully improved the written and oral communication skills of most students. Although team teaching was a positive experience for students and teachers, the engineering course did not permit the ESP teacher to address English language problems in details hence, the need for a specialized ESP course. The team teaching approach enabled us to build a bottom up ESP curriculum based on the students' actual needs. This approach improved their English language skills and addressed their problems related to oral presentations and report writing. Regardless of their overall use of English, students display more confidence in using the language.

### References

Davies, J. 1996. *Communication for engineering students*. Harlow: Longman

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**Figure 1**

Name	ID	Participation (+,-)	Oral (0-4)	Written (0-4)
Team (0-4)				

Figure 1 shows an empty table with the following headings: Name, ID, Participation (+,-) Oral (0-4), Written (0-4)

**Anthony Bynom** is head of the Language Support Service, Faculty of Engineering, United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain, UAE.